

BENEFITS OR EMPTY PROMISES: ECOTOURISM AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Recent tourism trends have included a shift from traditional packaged tours towards more ecologically-minded and sustainable models, often called ecotourism. Ecotourism is the fastest growing form of international tourism, averaging a 20% growth rate per year since 1990 (www.Ecotourism.org 2006). Ecotourism has been treated by many as a panacea to balance the needs of development and conservation. This case study examines a community-based ecotourism project in rural Chi Phat, Cambodia, assessing whether tourism is delivering on its promise to provide development and conservation benefits. Utilizing open-ended interviews and secondary survey data, the case study examines three issues: community members' thoughts and opinions on the ecotourism project; whether community members understand the goals of the project; and whether residents have stopped poaching and logging as a result of tourism jobs and income. This study has implications for ecotourism, especially which aspects of ecotourism might exceed expectations and which might fall short.

1.0 Introduction

Ecotourism has been defined by The International Ecotourism Society as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (www.Ecotourism.org 2006). More and more travelers wish to see the world in a manner that minimizes negative effects while still learning about unique cultures and environments. Ecotourism varies from traditional tourism in its central focus on minimizing impacts on both local cultures and environments, providing positive experiences and exchanges between hosts and guests, and also providing financial benefits for host communities to help with conservation and local development (Honey 2003).

While ecotourism is a relatively new concept in the nation of Cambodia, it has recently begun to emerge in several areas of the country (De Lopez et al. 2003). Bird watching, hiking, and other outdoor-centered vacations have grown in popularity over recent years. These vacations have also been designed to help support local communities, replacing the income originally earned from activities that damaged local resources with income from tourism-related activities such as guiding, community home stays, and cooking for guests (Turnbull 2005). Such programs aim to help educate tourists about local ways of life, introduce them to unique natural areas, benefit the local communities hosting these tourists, and encourage local stewardship of natural resources.

1.1 Project Purpose

This project examined whether or not ecotourism has delivered on promises to both develop the local host community and conserve natural resources. All information encountered prior to a field visit (e.g., media coverage) promoted Chi Phat as a positive example of ecotourism development; no negative observations of the project were found. The authors wondered if the project was receiving biased publicity or if it really was as successful as portrayed, and devised an exploratory project to look into these issues.

1.2 Study Setting

This case study centers on a small village called Chi Phat in Southwest Cambodia (Figure 1). Cambodia is a small nation in Southeast Asia, covering an area approximately 180,000 square kilometers in size, comparable to the American states of Washington or Missouri (Chandler 1991). It borders Thailand, Laos People's Democratic Republic, Vietnam, and the Gulf of Thailand. The nation is home to approximately 14.5 million people, of whom 80% live in rural areas and more than 75% are employed in agriculture (Chheang 2008). Fifty-five percent of Cambodia's citizens are under the age of 19 (Coates 2005). An estimated 35% of households live under the poverty line, which has been established by the World Bank as a single person making less than \$.45 per day, or less than \$2.25 per day for a family of five (worldbank.org).

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

Chi Phat is located in the Cardamom Mountains. Covering 44,000 square kilometers of jungle, or about 6% of Cambodia's landmass, the mountains are home to most of the nation's large mammal species and half of its birds, reptiles, and amphibians (Turnbull 2005). The Cardamom Mountains are considered one of the last wildlife corridors in Southeast Asia for many endangered and threatened species (wildlifealliance.org). According to the UNDP, "its biodiversity compares with that of the Amazon rainforest" (Turnbull 2005 p. 50).

The Cardamom Mountains have retained their pristine habitat partially due to their torrid history. For decades, the dense jungles of the Cardamom Mountains proved to be ideal hideouts for Khmer Rouge soldiers. While the Khmer Rouge soldiers exploited the forest resources, their presence deterred other populations from doing the same, inadvertently helping to preserve the area. It was not until 1998 that the last of the Khmer Rouge regime faded from the area; soon after the soldiers left, however, loggers moved in. The trade in luxury hardwoods began across the Vietnamese and Thai borders. Wildlife began to disappear during this time as well. In 2002, the Cambodian Forestry Administration appealed for international help in protecting the Cardamom Mountains when it was discovered that 32 elephants and 12 tigers had been poached from the area, and hundreds of acres of forest were being illegally logged per month (wildlifealliance.org).

1.3 Wildlife Alliance and Community-Based Ecotourism

Wildlife Alliance, a U.S.-based NGO, applied to help the Cambodian Forestry Administration with protecting the Cardamom Mountains. A conservation plan was implemented between Wildlife Alliance and the Cambodian government, creating new anti-logging laws and increasing patrols and penalties for offenders. Wildlife Alliance realized that simply ordering a halt of all consumptive activities in the area was unreasonable, as local communities needed to make a living, and suggested that community-based ecotourism programs might help mitigate the lost income communities faced by halting hunting and logging. Chi Phat was chosen among other sites for its proximity to potential outdoor tourism activities as well as a strong desire from local community members to participate. Thus, the Chi Phat community-based ecotourism program (CBET) was developed and implemented in 2007.

1.4 Community Based Ecotourism and Chi Phat

The Chi Phat Commune is a collection of four villages, home to around 550 families. Residents have historically engaged in destructive activities such as poaching, logging, and clearing land for agricultural activities. Wildlife Alliance determined through surveys, interviews, and other methods that the main cause for this destructive behavior was poverty, and began to develop ways to benefit the local economy while still protecting the natural resources. Wildlife Alliance helped develop adventure tourism, such as mountain biking and trekking, employing local community members as guides, hosts, and in other sectors of the tourism industry and development process.

Wildlife Alliance sought the input of community members in every step of the development process. Mountain bike and hiking trails were mapped out and created by former hunters and loggers that knew the area well. Many of these former hunters and loggers now serve as guides. Some individuals have volunteered their huts to be converted for tourist home stays (Mollman 2010). A committee has been developed, bringing together elected representatives from each village to better collaborate for community needs. The communities have also been educated in several areas necessary for hosting tourists, such as eco-awareness, guiding, first aid, hospitality, and mountain biking. According to Wildlife Alliance, 94% of the families in the commune have now thumb-printed an agreement to participate in the ecotourism project, and to desist from illegal wildlife and timber trading.

2.0 Methods

Sixteen semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted by the first author in Chi Phat from June to July 2010 with the help of a locally hired translator. Interviews were chosen over surveys with the hope of receiving fuller and more detailed responses (Miles and Huberman 1994). Questions pertained to personal demographic information, perceptions of the CBET project, and effects of tourists and tourism on both individual households and the community. Respondents were chosen due to their current involvement with the CBET project. While including non-CBET involved community members would have yielded additional pertinent information, it was beyond the scope of this project. In addition, four more interviews were conducted without need for a translator with various representatives of Wildlife Alliance. Wildlife Alliance also provided supplementary data taken from their own surveys, which were compared with the information we gathered.

3.0 Three Focused Themes

This paper focuses on three themes that emerged from the interviews with both community members and Wildlife Alliance employees: community perceptions of tourism and tourists; whether community members understood the goals of the project as outlined by Wildlife Alliance; and whether community members were still illegally poaching and logging.

3.1 Community perceptions of tourism and tourists

Respondents' views of tourism and tourists were recorded separately, as it was suspected that host communities might view them as separate entities. In order to note any differences in responses about effects tourism might have on the community and the respondent's idea of tourism's effects on his or her specific household, tourism effects on the household versus the community were also separated. Most answers ended up being similar, however, and there were very few negative opinions about either tourism or tourists.

Overall, respondents answered very favorably with regards to both impacts on individual households and on the community.

In terms of effects on the community, the respondents tended to value increased jobs and incomes (see Figure 2); in terms of effects on the household, intangible benefits were often mentioned, such as cultural interaction and making new friends (see Figure 3).

<Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here>

While increased incomes and jobs were listed as the main positive effects of tourism on both the household and community, we can see that several other benefits were mentioned as well. In further interview questions, residents also indicated that they valued the non-monetary community benefits of tourism including a cleaner village, inter-cultural experiences with tourists, the chance to practice English with tourists, and the support Wildlife Alliance has given to improve housing and job training and provide English lessons. While there is no direct evidence of this, it is possible that the respondents took these benefits into consideration when describing effects and benefits of hosting tourists both at the household and community levels. Berkes (2004) supports this assumption, stating that “rural communities in the developing world rarely equate benefits with simple monetary rewards. Various kinds of social and political benefits are also likely to be important” (p. 627).

The only negative feedback was about tourists, not tourism overall, and resulted from the perceived negative actions of a few specific visitors rather than tourists as a whole. Certain actions that went against local culture, such as wearing inappropriate clothing in town or while swimming the river or engaging in inappropriate activities with village children (such as encouraging them to pick up trash from the ground), were listed as negative aspects of tourists. There were very few negatives listed overall, especially in proportion to the number of positives listed.

3.2 Community Understanding of Goals and Objectives of the Project

The official goals and objectives of the project in Chi Phat, as outlined by Wildlife Alliance, are to conserve natural resources; to preserve local culture; to improve local communities’ livelihoods; to exchange tourists’ and locals’ cultures; and, to empower local communities (to eventually manage the project independently). Project participants need to have a clear understanding of each of these goals in order to assure that each goal is worked toward and eventually met. In each interview, respondents were asked to list as many project goals as they knew. Unfortunately, none of the respondents listed all of the goals at the same time; however, all the goals but one were listed by at least one person (see Figure 4). Two main themes emerged from the respondents, including one perceived additional goal and one missing goal.

<Insert Figure 4 about here>

Almost half of the respondents listed “cleaning the community” as a main goal of the CBET project, making it the most listed answer. While cleaning the community has been emphasized in order to appeal to tourists, it is not by itself a main goal. This suggests one of two things: first, that the community does not have an overall understanding of the goals set forth by Wildlife Alliance; or second, that the community members do understand the goals, but disagree about which might be most important or what should be included. Perhaps to the local residents the cleaning of the community is, in their opinions, one of the most important effects of the CBET project. Either way, it is an interesting point that Wildlife Alliance could look into further.

Unfortunately, not a single respondent mentioned empowering the community or getting it ready to run the program independently, one of Wildlife Alliance’s five stated goals. As Wildlife Alliance hopes to ready the community for independent management within the next three years, it is important that all community members are involved with the project. If community members rely on Wildlife Alliance for guidance and conflict mediation instead of learning how to run the program independently and working out conflict internally, there will most likely be problems when Wildlife Alliance is no longer involved in the program. Therefore, it is important for Wildlife Alliance to emphasize to the community that the organization will not always be there to mediate, answer questions, or give direction. The community must learn to work together and to take ownership of the project.

3.3 Willingness to stop consumptive activities

At the moment, both supplementary data provided by Wildlife Alliance and interviews with Chi Phat community members and Wildlife Alliance employees indicate that the community has not stopped poaching and logging as of yet. In hopes of discovering the motivations for these illegal activities, each respondent was asked whether poaching and logging should be considered a cultural activity (such as hunting bush meat for festivals or to show wealth in the village) or a survival technique (to provide food or income for everyday life). Respondents unanimously answered that it was for survival purposes only. One respondent suggested that we think of such activities as “subsistence poaching.” It was suggested by many respondents that most community members would give up these activities if it were feasible for them.

Respondents mentioned two main deterrents to halting poaching and logging. Lack of monetary resources was listed as the main motivation for continued poaching and logging; simply put, many community members were unable to support their families without trading forest goods. Interviews with both Wildlife Alliance employees and community residents indicated that most residents would be happy to completely stop hunting and logging if they were able to make enough money to replace income

from these activities. While many community members are not making enough money to deter all poaching and logging, some progress has been made. Community members were quick to blame non-CBET members as the main culprits of such activities and were optimistic that as tourism grows within Chi Phat, fewer and fewer people will continue to poach and log.

The second main deterrent to halting poaching and logging was the presence of a middleman who trades illegal goods from Chi Phat to other areas. Many respondents mentioned a man living in Chi Phat who pays poor villagers to hunt or set traps for wild animals; these animals are sold by the middleman to other traders in Phnom Penh or, if the species is valuable, smuggled to Thailand or Vietnam for large sums of money. In this sense, the middleman encourages the targeting of endangered species of value on the black market. While each respondent spoke negatively of the middleman, no one was willing to report him to proper authorities for fear of retaliation.

4.0 Challenges Ahead

Three main challenges emerged from the interviews regarding the future of the CBET project: increasing tourism, addressing the illegal trade of wildlife and wildlife parts, and fostering a sense of local ownership for the project.

First, many respondents mentioned the need for increased levels of tourism within the community (and the revenue associated with these increases) in order to help encourage more community members to halt consumptive illegal activities. Wildlife Alliance employees also hope for increased tourism, but caution that increased tourism must be handled in a sustainable manner with attention to quality. Several employees confirmed the need to improve the quality of tourism services provided in Chi Phat before expanding them in order to make sure tourists have the best products available. It is also important to make sure the type of tourism being offered helps to preserve the local culture and natural resources. Certain types of large-scale tourism would eventually harm the community and surrounding areas simply because of the amount of resources required to support it.

Second, the community, Wildlife Alliance, and the Cambodian authorities need to address the illegal trade in flora and fauna and acknowledge the presence of a middleman who lives off profits from this trade in order to better control poaching and logging. As long as there is someone in the community who is willing to pay high wages for the moderately easy jobs of setting snares or cutting trees, community members will continue to hunt and log. Continued poaching and logging will not only harm the natural resources of the area, but will also deter tourists from visiting. Many tourists visit Chi Phat for the chance to experience pristine wildlife habitats; if wildlife is scarce and forests are cut down, the appeal for tourists will be lost.

Last, and perhaps most important, fostering a sense of ownership of the CBET project within the entire community is essential to ensure that the project will continue in the future. The community needs to understand that this project is theirs, not Wildlife Alliance's, and that they will own and manage it independently in the future. While the literature provided by Wildlife Alliance makes this point clear, there seems to be a disconnect within the community on this point. Perhaps the message is not being communicated properly to those living in the community, or the community members say they understand the concept of local management but in reality do not. Either way, it is critical that the community understands that they will need to step up to manage the project and they should therefore learn as much as they can from Wildlife Alliance before it pulls out of the project.

5.0 Limitations

This project has several limitations. First, only twenty relatively short interviews were conducted, preventing generalization to the community as a whole or to any wider context. Second, lack of Khmer language skills required sixteen of the interviews to be conducted through a translator, on whom we relied for all interpretation. While there are no doubts as to the accuracy of the translations, there are often biases and differences between references and implications depending on the interpreter. Last, as the project was meant only as a case study, its relevance and influence must be carefully considered before comparing this case study to another or using the information gathered to help develop another project elsewhere.

6.0 Implications

Has ecotourism lived up to its promise in Chi Phat? At the moment, yes. Each respondent claimed to be happy with the CBET project and enjoyed hosting tourists. The community seems to understand the importance of conserving their natural resources. Tourist feedback collected by Wildlife Alliance has been positive, and overall tourist numbers are increasing from year to year. However, there are still challenges that must be addressed in order to help grow the project in a sustainable manner.

Chi Phat is often regarded as a model ecotourism site in Cambodia due to the perceived success of the CBET project so far. It is important to examine and address any challenge that might have hindered the project in its development, and continued challenges at present, in order to help develop similar programs in other areas. Similar communities within Cambodia and in other parts of the developing world may hopefully look to Chi Phat as an example of a success story in terms of balancing conservation and community development initiatives.

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www.Wildlifealliance.org. [Website.]



Figure 1. Location of Chi Phat Community-Based Ecotourism Site within Cambodia. Source: Asia-adventures.com

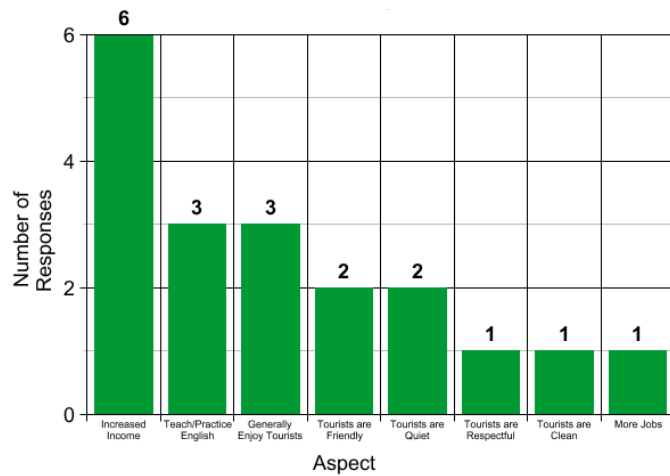


Figure 2. Perceived Positive Aspects of Tourists on the Community

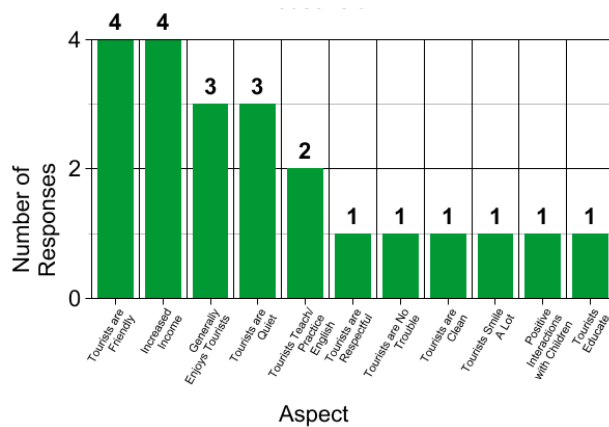


Figure 3. Perceived Positive Aspects of Tourists on the Household

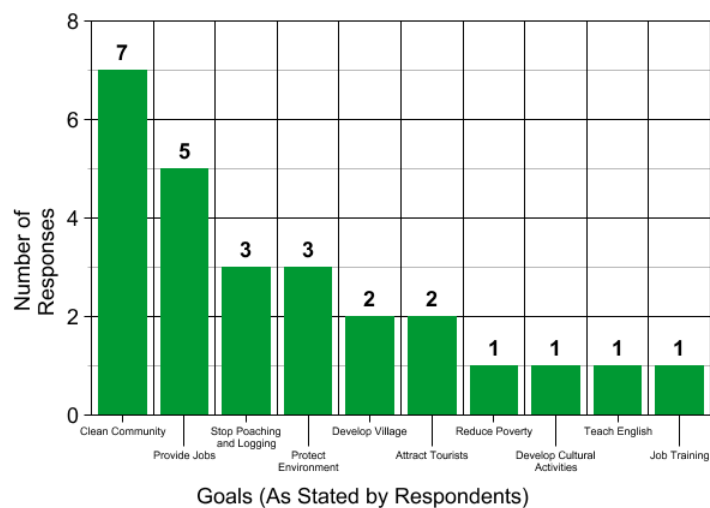


Figure 4. Perceived Goals of the Project